DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 024 JC 960 627

AUTHOR	Burstein, Matthew
TITLE	The Thin Green Line: Community Colleges' Struggle To Do More with Less. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-96-11
PUB DATE	Aug 96
CONTRACT	RR93002003
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Class Size; College Planning; *Community Colleges; Economic Factors; Educational Economics; Educational Finance; Enrollment Trends; *Financial Exigency; *Financial Support; *Institutional Mission; Program Termination; *Retrenchment; School Effectiveness; *State Aid; Teacher Student Ratio; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	*California Community Colleges; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

since the economic difficulties of the 1980s and 1990s, community colleges have had to reconcile limited resources with open door admissions policies and a broad institutional mission. College budgets have not generally increased sufficiently to compensate for rising costs, with state-level financial support for higher education falling by 9.5% to 30% in various states between 1990 and 1991. In California, a 1992 study revealed that the revenue sources supporting the state's community colleges provided $2.8 million per year, but that $5.1 billion were needed for the colleges to meet the standards advocated by the state Board of Governors. This funding gap has had many consequences in the state, such as a larger student/faculty ratios, larger class sizes, and higher course loads taught by instructors each academic term. Some of the methods utilized by California's community colleges for working around the budget limitations have included increasing business ventures, such as licensing college logos and accepting corporate sponsorship for athletics; cutting course sections; reducing personnel; and transferring costs by deferring planned maintenance or moving employees to alternately-funded programs. Although many of these activities have had serious effects on the ability of the colleges to fulfill their mission, similar measures will have to be taken to balance community needs, institutional mission, and state resources in the future. (HAA)

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ERIC Digest

By

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Digest

August 1996 EDO-JC-96-11

The Thin Green Line: Community Colleges' Struggle to Do More With Less

by Matthew Burstein

There is a tension at the very heart of community colleges: With their ambitious and broad institutional mission to meet the varied educational needs of their constituents, community colleges must reconcile limited resources with open door admissions policies. This tension has been exacerbated by America's economic difficulties in the late 1980's and early 1990's. While enrollments at most community colleges have shown an upward trend, their budgets have not increased sufficiently to compensate for colleges' rising costs (Kapraun and Heard, 1992). Making matters even more difficult, state-level financial support for higher education between 1990 and 1991 fell 30% in Massachusetts, 27.2% in New Jersey, 15% in Rhode Island and Virginia, 13% in Connecticut, 10% in Maryland, and 9.5% in California (Summers, 1991).

In order to deal with the budget troubles which seem so much a part of educational planning in the 1990's, community colleges have taken various steps to preserve a maximal amount of student programming while simultaneously facing up to the harsh realities of their limited funding levels. In order to meet the goals of their broad mission statements while adjusting to insufficient or diminishing levels of funding, colleges have generally had to cut back on programming and find sources of revenue outside of state support. This digest examines the limitations of California's educational funding plans and chronicles the efforts of California's community colleges to deal with the impact of their state's financial problems.

California's Funding Gap

The California community college system, with its 107 colleges and 1.4 million students, accounts for 10% of all U.S. college students and is the largest system of higher education in the world (Huggett, 1991). A 1992 study undertaken by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges revealed that the revenue sources which support the colleges would provide approximately $2.8 billion dollars for the academic year. However, the study also determined that $5.1 billion would be required for the colleges to meet the standards advocated by the Board of Governors to carry out their institutional mission as set forth in California's *Master Plan for Higher Education*. This "funding gap" is the difference between actual funding and the funding required to fully meet the institutional mission, and, at $2.3 billion, the gap is 82% more than what is actually available in the budget. According to the study, this gap has developed over the past decade as a result of 1978's Proposition 13 (which limited property taxes), inadequate funding between 1982 and 1985, the funding cap on growth since 1982, and California's current budgetary problems. The following elements of the gap were highlighted by the Board of Governor's study:

- $245 million to adequately serve the 52,000 enrolled but not funded FTE students.
- $1,548 million to raise the operating budgets from their current levels ($3,100 per FTES) to the current Program-Based Funding standard ($4,800 per FTES).
- $39 million to increase staff development and deferred facilities maintenance funding to the recommended levels.
- $98 million to continue the capital outlay program at necessary levels.
- $382 million to restore access levels to those suggested by the *Master Plan* by meeting the demand for adult education.

Potential Consequences of the Funding Gap

California's community colleges have not remained unscathed by the seriousness and the duration of the funding gap. The picture of California's community colleges that is painted by the Board of Governor's study is one of a system attempting to meet the needs of its constituents by straining beyond its means. Compared to similar colleges in eight large, industrial states, California's community colleges have a higher student/faculty ratio (27:1 compared with 18:1), larger class sizes, and higher course loads taught by instructors during each academic term (five per term in California, compared with only four elsewhere). Similarly, library facilities do not provide the quality or quantity of services available in comparable systems, and they frequently rely on outmoded technology (Newmeyer and McIntyre, 1992).

The funding gap has also had an impact on educational access in the state. Whereas community colleges served one in every eleven adult Californians in 1981, the colleges were serving one in every fourteen a decade later. For colleges to have maintained the same level of access, they would have had to enroll 280,000 more students than had actually enrolled in Fall 1991 -- an unlikely proposition, as it is estimated that the colleges turned away 120,000 potential students (Newmeyer and McIntyre, 1992). Moreover, tuition increases have caused a large number of students who might otherwise have attended the University of California or the California State University to enroll in community colleges for the first two

years of their undergraduate education. This influx of students intending to transfer has diverted college resources away from such activities as job retraining or citizenship education (including English as a second language).

How Colleges Are Adjusting

California's community colleges have taken decisive action during this crisis period. Some of the methods utilized by colleges for working around budget limitations include:

- Increasing business ventures: licensing products with college logos and mascots, accepting corporate sponsorship for athletic championships, and marketing college event radio and television broadcasting rights.
- Cutting course sections: during a three year period, colleges cut some 13,000 course sections, about 10% of all classes offered in the system.
- Increasing average class size: 31.5 students, compared to the national average of 21.
- Personnel reductions: several ways of reducing budget expenditures included not replacing vacancies created by the departure of faculty, staff and administrators; reducing many staff positions to part-time status; laying off employees; hiring freezes; and implementing "golden handshake" and early retirement policies.
- Transferring of costs: deferring maintenance, shifting employees to alternately (or non-governmentally) funded programs.
- Redirection of monies between educational units.
- Offering low-expense coursework: because all courses receive the same amount of state assistance, colleges began to focus resources on courses which cost less to produce.
- Cutting summer course offerings.
- Reducing student activities, facilities and services, including library hours and dramatic productions.
- Moving off-campus and extension courses back to the campus.
- Cutting the distribution of the schedule of classes: rather than merely mailing schedules to all local constituents, schools began to mail schedules only to continuing students or made them available on campus.
- Utilizing differential fee structures, whereby community college students who already have baccalaureate degrees paid $50 per unit instead of the normal $13 per unit fee.

Concluding Remarks

Many of these activities have had serious effects on the abilities of community colleges to meet the needs of their constituents and fulfill their missions. The differential fee structure, for example, directly resulted in a loss of 50% of students with Bachelor's degrees and 4% of all community college students (Brinkman, 1993). Not only did this fee structure reduce college enrollments, but it demonstrated an institutional bias: Generally, students with bachelor's degrees who attended community college were those who were seeking job training of some sort. This bias toward traditional transfer and vocational students stands in contrast to the universality of the mission of the community college. The differential fee structure was subsequently dropped in January of 1996, marking a return to the broader notion of educational access that the community college represents. Colleges will have to continue to make similar strides to balance the needs of the community, the educational mission of the college, and the financial situation of the state.

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